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## Long Island

### When home is 2 countries

**A group of young adults airlifted to the U.S. from Vietnam in 1975 return to their birthplace in first trip sanctioned by both governments**

BY ARNOLD ABRAMS  
STAFF WRITER

June 12, 2005

A strange thing happened to Jared Rehberg when he returned several years ago to Vietnam, his birthland.

"Everything looked foreign, I couldn't speak the language and I knew nothing about the nation's history," said the Manhattan resident, who has lived all but the first few months of his 30 years in the United States.

"Still, this was the only place I really felt was mine," he added. "Sometimes I feel like I'm a visitor in America."

Jennifer Noone knows the feeling, although she doesn't fully share Rehberg's sentiments.

"People often ask me where I'm from," said Noone, who also is 30, was born in Vietnam and lives in Manhattan. "And when I say New York, they say, 'No, where are you really from?'"

"There's always this feeling about having to explain

yourself," said Noone, who grew up in Garden City. "But that's part of the territory. It has never stopped me from loving America."

Juggling feelings about the U.S. and their native country are just two of the things Rehberg and Noone have in common with 19 other young adults embarking today for Vietnam.

They all were part of Operation Babylift, a rescue mission mounted in the final days of the Vietnam War. The three-week project, started in early April of 1975 by the U.S. Air Force, brought roughly 2,000 Vietnamese children to America.

Most were orphans, but some were Amerasians and others were slipped into the airlift by privileged Vietnamese families with relatives in the United States.

The return trip, the first sanctioned by the U.S. and Vietnamese governments, will allow adoptees less than two full days of dinners and touring in the former South Vietnamese capital. It is sponsored by World Airways, an Atlanta-based charter airline that played a significant role in the war.

Led by the late Ed Daly, a hard-drinking, pistol-packing executive, the airline defied American embassy officials and their South Vietnamese allies by staging the operation's first flight.

Although unauthorized, that flight, from Saigon on of April 2, 1975, forced Washington's hand.

The following day, President Gerald Ford announced the start of Operation Babylift, which cost \$2 million, involved dozens of U.S. planes and lasted until April 26 -- three days before North Vietnamese tanks broke through the gates of South Vietnam's presidential palace.

Jennifer Noone was on the last flight. She was the last orphan united with adoptive Americans because she was so sick with pneumonia, malnourishment and salmonella. Her new parents were Garden City residents Bryon and Lana Noone, who on April 23 had adopted another airlifted orphan.

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Their first adoptee, whom they named Heather, also arrived terribly sick. Shortly after bringing her home, the Noones had to take her to Long Island Jewish Medical Center. Unable to fight off her ailments, she died May 17. Less than three weeks later, the Noones brought Jennifer home. With Each returnee was allowed to bring one guest, Jennifer chose her mother, a retired music teacher. Her father, an English professor, died of cancer two years ago at age 57.

Thrilled to be visiting Vietnam, Lana Noone, 58, is going with a solemn mission: She plans to scatter soil from Heather's grave into the Saigon River.

"When Heather died, I promised she would never be forgotten," she said. "And this will be part of that promise. Now there will be something in Vietnam of her."

After recovering from her illness, Jennifer grew and learned to play the piano, excelled in sports, earned top grades and was a Carey High School cheerleader before entering Drew University in New Jersey. She earned a master's degree from Columbia University and is now is a clinical social worker.

"Garden City was a great place to grow up, and my parents could not have been more loving or caring or supportive," said Jennifer, who recently sent a thank-you letter to former President Ford for saving her life. "I am a very lucky person."

The 21 returnees include several software engineers, a stock trader, a college admissions officer and a magazine executive. Which doesn't mean they are fully accepted.

Rehberg, for example, is still smarting from a recent confrontation with a subway panhandler, who cursed him with a racial epithet after being rejected. In addition, the Manhattan resident vividly recalled his reaction to suggestions, made by some older men when he returned to Vietnam in 2002, that the orphans had been kidnapped for political reasons.

"I thought, 'So why didn't you adopt us?'" said Rehberg, who grew up in Massachusetts and is a Web site coordinator for an Asian-American cable television network. "I was too polite to actually say that, of course, but their remarks touched a sore spot. I will always feel I missed out on a lot by not experiencing my native culture."

Nevertheless, Betty Tisdale, who helped run the orphanage that placed him on the airlift -- and who was known as the Angel of Saigon because of her efforts to help Vietnamese children -- believes Rehberg benefited greatly from the project.

"I see Jared occasionally," said Tisdale, 82, who heads an adoption agency in Seattle, "and I can't help thinking that none of his talents -- music, design, sensitivity -- would have developed in Saigon."

Nevertheless, the question of whether Americans had done the right thing long troubled Ross Meador, who in 1975 was the 19-year-old Saigon manager for a U.S. adoption agency.

"I had a houseful of kids that I put on the first World Airways flight," said Meador, now a California attorney who specializes in international business transactions. "And for a long time I wondered if we had made a mistake. Maybe they would have been better off staying in their own country."

He posed that question several years ago at an informal reunion of Operation Babylift.

"Are you crazy?" they replied. "You saved our lives."